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Nancy Mack

Wright State University - Main Campus, nancy.mack@wright.edu

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Writing for Change: When Motive Matters

Nancy Mack

Believing in Change

If one asked a high-level university administrator what changes as a result of the work done in first year composition classes, I suspect the administrator's answer would be that students change--they change into better writers than they were when they came to the university. Who could disagree with the goal of producing better writers? The problem as I see it lies with the university's emphasis on changing students rather than allowing changes in the university. Change is a necessity for all the parties involved.

Career teachers know that they must change frequently for their own growth and development, or they become stagnant and ineffective. It is all too easy to fall into the comfortable rut of just going through the motions--not really reaching the students. Students are one of the best potential sources of change for the teacher. Through interaction with the many personalities and cultural perspectives that are represented in the classroom community, the teacher can learn a great deal about teaching and larger life issues as well. Regretfully, institutions change more slowly than people do. The university still retains many practices that are centuries old and are unresponsive to current students' lives. Gone are the days when the university's only responsibility was to acculturate young, white males into elite, European society. Rather than seeing students as empty vessels to be filled, the university should view students as wealthy storehouses of life experiences. I have gained much wisdom from the nontraditional students in my classroom, many of whom do not fit neatly into the over-generalized categories of race, class, gender, or sexuality. For instance, my students have shared life experiences about being: a fast food employee, a Viet Nam War veteran, a lab technician, a parent of a child with cancer, a person with a sight disability, and a mother of a gay son. It is my hope that after speaking up at the university, these marginalized group members may find it easier to raise their voices in other social relations.

Unlike the university's reticence to change, the first year student will undergo a great deal of change because of the decision to pursue an advanced degree. Many will learn about people and ideas beyond those in their home neighborhood. At the same time, these nontraditional students will be stressed to their limits as they struggle to balance the needs of home, work, and school. Moreover, many will find their cultural identity in direct conflict with the university's demands for assimilation. And of course, students will face all these changes, no matter what happens in their first year composition class. It is probably a little

pompous to believe that composition teachers precipitate the biggest changes in first year college students' lives. The literacy development of these students may even be more influenced by other students, professors, and course assignments than from the essays assigned in one composition course. This is not to say that what composition teachers do is unimportant. Thinking through the complex ways that students, teachers, universities, and other social institutions change and do not change is important for designing a useful composition course.

Language makes it possible for us to reflect on experience and to enact change on many levels, and this is why I want to teach students how to use writing to change their lives. Yes, I want students to become better writers just like every administrator and trustee would expect, but I don't want to change students into better writers so they can pass some proficiency test or pass a course requirement for a professor who hasn't written anything of substance for twenty years. We must be careful not to reify the institution into having needs larger than those of the people it serves. I want students to become better writers so they can change their world with their words.

My inspiration for this point comes from many years of reading the work of Paulo Freire. One of the joys of scholarship (and another one of the potential sources of change for teachers) is to reread a favorite text periodically and reflect again upon what the author is saying. I return often to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to ponder Freire's theory of literacy education. At the end of chapter two, Freire discusses historicity as a key premise of liberatory education. Freire reasons that because humans are historical beings who can create their own history, they can transform reality by posing problems: "Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming--as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (65). I particularly like Freire's use of the word "becoming" in this passage--I like thinking of change as a process of becoming. The future depends on our becoming what we want to be.

In *Pedagogy of Hope*, written twenty years after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire foregrounds the ontological need for hope. In the "Opening Words," he cautions that hope should not be too idealistic but should be grounded in action. Freire's scholarship illuminates the necessary relationship between action and reflection. Reflection includes a critique of the limit-situations in everyday life. Freire's process of critical reflection involves students in decoding their lives as a way to examine the generative themes that arise from their daily experiences. From this critical examination, the students begin to see problems that they can pose for the group to study. The group can then advocate actions

to solve local problems. Hope grows from the students' active critique, inquiry, and advocacy.

Active Critique

Many teachers, more influenced by postmodern literary scholarship than the work of Freire, are taking up critique as an important part of both reading and writing instruction. I applaud this interest in teaching critique; however, in some classrooms the students are relegated to the passive role of listening to the professor's prepared lecture about theories of dominant ideology. In contrast, other professors and graduate teaching associates take a more active approach by encouraging students to construct their own critiques of popular culture such as print advertisements, music videos, situation comedies, current movies, network news coverage, and tabloid journalism. Luckily, my students have shown me that parody is a powerful genre for expressing these critiques. Students enjoy rewriting everything from *Romeo and Juliet* to a *Brady Bunch* episode to include their own social commentary. A parody is a more active demonstration of critique than a paper on some obscure point about Lyotard. An even larger problem than rescuing students from passive critiques is that these intellectual performances, whether they are done by the teacher or the student, can become an end in themselves, leaving students cynical and removed from active involvement in changing their life histories. Critique must always be balanced with careful inquiry and thoughtful advocacy.

Ethnographic Inquiry

Careful inquiry should inform the students' important decisions about what and how things should be changed. Traditional composition courses use the research paper to teach inquiry with library research valued as the only credible source of knowledge. Research papers can turn into little more than an exercise in various types of plagiarism. The students' desire to plagiarize may be due in part to intimidation by library sources. When the students' life experiences and home language are devalued by the teacher, the privileged text can become overpowering. By triangulating real life experiences with the author's perspective on the topic, students can view knowledge more critically. Ethnographic observations, informant interviews, and reflective writing about personal experience can be paired with reading expert texts. The knowledge acquired through ethnographic research can help the students to gain power in relation to the sage texts. James Zebroski and I have written about our experiences with ethnographic projects in *Social Issues in the English Classroom*. In addition to these benefits, we have found that ethnographic strategies can

be used to both critique and affirm cultural experience. The immediacy of ethnographic data can persuade students to reconsider rigid preconceptions about culture. For example, one of my students, who was positive that women had received more than equal rights with men, observed parental sex roles in families eating dinner at McDonalds; he reported to the class that to his surprise in almost every family he observed, the women cleaned off the table, sometimes while the men and children were exiting the restaurant. Ethnographic projects can be affirming when students are asked to gather data about folk, or nonelite, cultures. When I taught in prison, one group of students collected parole board stories, while another group chose to write about the benefits of living in a low-income family. Writing about their cultural experiences gave the inmates a way to reclaim and analyze their experiences. The new information preserved about an underrepresented group can be used to critique the cultural stereotypes about this group. Students need not be members of the group that they study. For example, one group of inmates interviewed African American prison guards and learned much about how race affects the guards' decisions about institutional rules. Observing real people and real social settings gives students a rich, complex subject to write about. Ethnographic data gathering techniques utilize writing as a way to foster a more detailed and thoughtful examination of daily life. Students can then measure their scholarly readings against their ethnographic observations.

Local Advocacy

Pushing students to think about changing society can be as problematic as critique and inquiry. All too often, when I espouse writing for change, the only type of change that comes to mind is a too global, pie-in-the-sky dream of eternal peace, love, and understanding. I believe that change can take place on a much more local level. Many of us would agree that the university would be a wonderful place in which to initiate changes. Apparently, I take Bartholomae's title "Inventing the University" more literally than he does: I want students to invent better universities than the ones that have been given to them. Asking students to propose changes on a local level in their own lives, workplaces, universities, or neighborhoods can help students to avoid hackneyed topics and common sense arguments. My students have investigated and written about campus issues such as parking problems, increasing textbook prices, and reporting acts of violence. In the next article in this issue, Cathy Sayer discusses how she encouraged students to advocate change at the university.

As a writing teacher, I encourage students to write up their critiques and proposals for change in many formats other than the five paragraph

theme. One format that seems to work particularly well for proposing change is an advocacy letter. An advocacy letter can be a letter to the editor of a local paper, a letter of complaint to a campus official, a letter defining a problem to a work supervisor, a letter asking for support from a family member, a letter suggesting a program to a charity, a letter requesting a policy change to a company, a letter detailing a problem to the state attorney general, etc. Students seem to feel comfortable with the idea that a letter is frequently written to advocate a specific change. A colleague, Debbie Bertsch, had a student in her class who worked in a deli department at a discount store. The student chose to write a letter to the manager, detailing how the deli department was treated unfairly in comparison to the seafood department. She shared the letter with her coworkers, gathered their signatures, and at last report, the student was preparing to send the letter off to management.

Although many students have gotten positive responses to their letters, it is important to spend some time considering the reasons why such letters may not provoke the desired change. It would be unwise to encourage students to believe that major social change can be accomplished through a single correspondence. Students need to think through why a local business or even a family member may not listen or may discount their letter as confirming a predetermined stereotype. Recently, I had my requests for change trivialized in a report as "the only woman in the group who whined until she got her way." Of course, the irony here is that I didn't get my way; it was only the males' perception that I did. Encouraging students to write advocacy letters without analyzing the dynamics of the power relations involved will only lead students into negative experiences that reinforce hopelessness. If students are encouraged to advocate change, then they should be asked to anticipate the likely negative reactions to their letters. Suggesting collective action and affiliation with other groups who have the same needs can increase the effectiveness of individual requests for change. For instance, a student might realize that concerns about safety in the locker rooms at an exercise facility are shared by faculty and staff who also workout there, but are not shared by the security officers and the buildings and grounds administrators who wish to keep the university's crime statistics confidential for fear of bad publicity. Classroom assignments are usually just dummy runs that are supposed to prepare the students for some future writing experience; advocacy letters work for real changes in situations that the students are experiencing in their daily lives.

Language and the Motive to Write

For school writing to be worth doing, it must serve a similar function to other real life writing. For example, I could point out to my students that in writing this article I engaged in a process similar to their own: I critiqued a traditional teaching practice; I discovered the generative theme of "Why teach writing?" from my real life; I gathered ethnographic information from observing and interviewing my students; I compared my experiences with scholarly readings; and then I wrote this article, advocating a specific change in teaching practices. Students are frequently asked to write papers that a college professor would never want to write. How can we ask students to engage in an activity that we would never do? The writing assignments must respect the students' motives to write. Of course, there are occasions when I have to write independent of my own motives, such as when I have to write a yearly activity report. I try to create my own motives for writing that report such as my own desire to reflect on my accomplishments for personal satisfaction and career evaluation. But, writing something in order to assume the motives of someone you do not affiliate with is a negative circumstance, one that I do not wish to pass along to others. Should it be a teacher's goal to teach students how to write in order to follow the directions and motives of their supervisors? This type of functional literacy teaches students that it is not their place to have motives and that they are better off doing what others ask of them. Writing in this type of context functions to oppress students and prepares them for a career of mindlessly following directions. I would much rather ask students to write about things that they wish to change for their own reasons and motives.

Unfortunately, there are no guarantees; every innovative classroom assignment has the potential to be turned into an oppressive practice, depending upon the philosophy of the teacher and the commitment of the students involved. More important than any of these teaching practices of critique, inquiry, or advocacy is the student's motive to write. If the student looks upon these writing experiences as just more assignments to be done in order to get out of a required class, little will be gained. Students have to tap into a genuine desire to provoke change or the whole thing falls apart. The teacher must remember that the student's motive to write is more important than the parameters of the assigned writing task. I always tell students that my assignments are negotiable because my larger goal is that they do meaningful, quality writing. As I have learned to respect change, I have come to the realization that I want students to believe that most things in life are negotiable, including my classroom assignments.

A deeper understanding of the motive to write will help teachers to design classroom activities and assignments that will be worth doing for all involved. I have long been interested in motivation; however, as a beginning classroom teacher, I was more interested in cute activities that would cunningly capture students' interest. I am ashamed to admit that my premise must have been that I had to trick students into writing. I never realized that I had such a low opinion of student motivation until I heard someone talk about the differences between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. In a subtle way, I was trying to coerce students into writing. William Glasser, who has written about school reforms for decades, points out that most of the work to be done in schools is so meaningless that we have to coerce students to do it, frequently with artificial punishments and rewards.

But it wasn't Glasser who really helped me to understand motive; it was a language theorist, Lev Vygotsky. Glasser's text offers an alarmist's critique which centered me on the generative theme of why teachers ask students to write. This critique in itself wasn't enough to propel me forward into changing my classroom. I needed to do more investigation into the role of language in human development. I sought out a book of Vygotsky's that I had read in graduate school, *Thought and Language*. I always was attracted to the figurative language that Vygotsky used to portray the relationship between thought and language:

The structure of speech does not simply mirror the structure of thought; that is why words cannot be put on by thought like a ready-made garment. Thought undergoes many changes as it turns into speech. It does not merely find expression in speech; it finds its reality and form (219).... A speaker often takes several minutes to disclose one thought. In his [or her] mind the whole thought is present at once, but in speech it has to be developed successively. A thought may be compared to a cloud shedding a shower of words. (251)

Through reading Vygotsky, I had learned that there was a complex, dialectic relationship between thought and language in which a thought came into existence as it grew and changed through the process of inner speech. According to Vygotsky, an idea doesn't reside preformed in our minds, waiting to be translated into language, word by word. Instead an idea starts as something almost biochemical, a disturbance, a feeling that we sense, and then as we struggle to bring this feeling outward into discourse, we use language to create meaning. A thought goes through a shaping process where its sense is pushed and pulled by syntax, until the thought develops into something that hopefully can be expressed in speech. Vygotsky described motive as an "affective-volitional tendency"

provoked by our "desires and needs, our interests and emotions" (252). Motive can be explained as a disequilibrium or a movement toward change, where a "thought creates a connection, fulfills a function, or solves a problem" (249).

The role of motive in the change process is primary. Without desires and needs, interests and emotions, change would be pointless and language would be only babbling. In comparison, language's importance to change derives from its capacity to reflect on experience. Actually, all semiotic activity has the potential to foster reflection, but being an English teacher, I find words far more useful than numbers, symbols, or gestures. Through language we can do several clever things in relationship to experience so that we can think our way into another reality. First of all, language gives us the means to step outside of the confines of the immediacy of experience in order to walk around it, examine it, and name it. The restrictions of time and space can be transcended with language. We can use language to represent experience to someone who wasn't there. We can distance ourselves even farther through analysis and criticism, eventually employing language to imagine a totally different future from the initial experience.

Meaningful Memoir

The usefulness of language for changing the future may be more readily apparent than its role in representing the past. Writing memoir can be a way to change the meaning of past experiences which in turn can change our present, past, and future perceptions. Language gives us the power to make our life mean what we want it to mean. Asking students to write narratives seems superficial now that I've been experimenting with memoir. The narratives that are traditionally assigned in school are generally trite little pieces in which meaning comes prepackaged in the form of a thesis, such as a most embarrassing moment or a time when determination and hard work paid off. I would define memoir as different from the traditional school narrative in that the meaning comes from the writer's reflection on experience, not from the teacher. Memoir uses the meaning-making function of language. The author of a memoir piece can rewrite experience, making it into anything ranging from comedy to tragedy. Through language we gain the time and space necessary to find humor in things that were not originally funny, personal integrity in difficult experiences, and significant life lessons in painful mistakes. The rich details recalled through memoir help the writer to discover a pattern or an anomaly in a similar way to ethnographic analysis. Thus, the theme or thesis is constructed from the written text rather than before it is written. The writer's reflections on experience from the present may be

interpreted differently than the reflections that another person may have had, or even the writer may have had, prior to composing the memoir. Through representation, language gives us the ability to change experience, to rewrite the experience as we decide for it to be. Even memoir involves writing for change, to change meaningless experience into meaningful experience.

But to portray language as a faithful servant helping us to change everything would be a misrepresentation. Language is far more unruly. Language comes to us charged with the motives of others who have used it in the past and carries with it the ideology of the dominant group; it has no choice. A contemporary of Vygotsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, demonstrated that when we use language, we enter into a social dialogue with others. Bakhtin detailed how each object that we struggle to name is surrounded with alien words that are charged with the values of others that highlight the object in different ways. Thus, the writer must use his or her motives to persevere against the motives of others to find the right words. If Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic word is added to Vygotsky's model of inner speech, we can begin to see the complexity of the process whereby a thought is brought into being through language. Language itself complicates our motives with the motives of others so that it takes a great deal of work to say what we wish to mean.

Respecting the Students' Motives

When the teacher's motive is to change bad writers into good writers or to change the student's membership from one discourse club to another more academically rigorous club, the emphasis is only on changing the student, not on changing the world. By having such lowered expectations, by hoping that students will merely become functional writers at the university, we set students up for a school game where the motives for writing are to move on to the next university hurdle. Getting over is more important than saying something.

School may pervert the whole motive to write. Teachers have to make up classroom worksheets where students can invent an audience for their writing. In real situations where the writer speaks for change, like this one, the audience is less of a fiction and in many ways far more complex. We demean students by assuming that they are so stupid that they don't have anything to say, that form matters more than content. This type of reasoning is how the five paragraph theme got started; it is a lowered expectation for students who will be writing in an artificial school situation where the goal is to check for minimal competency, not to listen to what the students have to say about anything that matters to them--and

anyone who has language has something to say. When the communication context gets perverted, it is the motive to write that suffers most.

If the students' motives to write are valued, then it behooves the teacher to engage students in writing projects where what is being written about matters. This article has suggested some specific examples: a parody presented to the classroom community that critiques popular myths, an ethnographic essay that speaks for an underrepresented member of society, a presentation that affirms the wisdom of folk culture, an advocacy letter sent to a university administrator about an issue of concern to students, and a personal memoir that assigns meaning to a complex life experience. These assignments are only examples of what can be done; they should not be taken as prescriptions for practices to be followed. More important than the individual assignment is that the motives for writing relate to changing the writer's world by creating new knowledge or suggesting new courses of action.

I find that spending a lot of time constructing the premise for writing and allowing student to help design some elements of the assigned task promotes student ownership. Also, making the audience more tangible through conducting interviews with an informant, sending a copy of a class publication to the people consulted, or inviting a representative to hear a reading of the papers increases motivation. But, I have to admit that it is hard to break out of the school game that students know all too well. Many students would rather do artificial assignments and not write for change. Students quickly learn that writing about something that you care about can be a real disadvantage when trying to construct school papers. It's rarely painful for the student to offer up a tidy narrative that reproduces common myths. The biggest problem with playing the school game is that I do not want to spend my life reading such trivia. Years ago, I decided to never again spend hours grading grammar worksheets; reading stacks of five paragraph themes is equally repugnant. Imagine spending twenty five years of your life reading comparison contrast essays--not me, I want more interesting reading material.

I will also add the caution that respecting the students' motives to write does not mean that anything goes. The student's motive to write may be personally offensive to the teacher. While teaching in prison and at a university, I have received sexually explicit papers that were meant to offend me. I learned in prison that the teacher must react quickly and loudly; I simply tell the student that this is not acceptable and turning in a similar paper again is grounds for removal. There are other topics that I would not permit a student to write about such as advocating violence against others. Each teacher should think through his or her laundry list of what is offensive. Likewise, the teacher should caution students that

they may not be ready to write about a particular personal experience that is unsettling or too painful. Asking students to write a memoir is not a spill-your-guts contest. The students and the teacher need to know more about memoir as a genre to avoid this pitfall.

The Teacher's Motives

In composition courses, the motives of two groups must be examined: those of the students and those of the teacher. Early in my studies of liberatory pedagogy, I naively believed that it would be empowering to announce to students that they could write on any topic of their choice. The problem is that the precedence of artificial school writing leads them to choose topics much like those assigned by past teachers. Of course, many students desire to expedite the whole process of topic selection by just recycling an old paper from high school. The practice of announcing that students can write on any topic they want does not address the students' motives for writing or the teacher's motives for assigning writing. Teachers are bad role models for the importance of motive when they say in effect that what we are doing here is so pointless that I have no motives for topic selection: I believe in nothing. On the contrary, students know that teachers believe in something; therefore, they assume that just like the other teachers that they have had in the past, this teacher believes in school writing--writing that is correct and follows a rigid format only found in schools. Unless teachers want the status quo to prevail, they must carefully consider their motives for assigning writing and reveal them to the students. Through the authorship of a course plan, teachers can demonstrate the significance of motive.

In the first book to suggest a Vygotskian approach to teaching composition, *Thinking Through Theory*, James Zebroski emphasizes that a syllabus is one of a teacher's most important pieces of writing because it represents that teacher's current theory of writing instruction. Regretfully, most syllabi for first year composition courses have a coherence problem. These syllabi are incoherent hodgepodes of eclectic practices held over from former teachers, popular textbooks, and reigning writing programs. Some proponents of the writing across the curriculum movement have even suggested that the composition course has no academic content; therefore, composition could be taught within the context of any other course that assigns writing. Zebroski takes the position that a composition course does indeed have a content and that content is two fold or double-voiced:

The primary objective of a writing course is to encourage students, through a variety of experiences and by means of reflective writing assignments, to arrive at a more explicit and conscious "theory" of

writing that can guide them to understand their own writing process.... Because students are rarely conscious that they have a "theory" of composing that is already quite developed and sophisticated, the teacher needs to assist in providing secondary content that can help students to get at the "primary content." (17)

Zebroski suggests that the secondary content should be based on Vygotsky's theory that language functions all have their roots in social relations. Thus, real life social relations are the sources for the more removed language habits of inner speech and writing. For this reason, Zebroski encourages course themes that study the life of the communities that the students experience. Zebroski then goes on to explain two examples of secondary content or course themes that he has developed: *Community and the Individual*, and *Working in the USA*.

As much as I am instructed by Zebroski's scholarship and have experimented with the themes that he suggests, no teacher can simply take up the motives of another teacher. Consequently, there should never be one master syllabus to teach from. Each teacher must compose a syllabus from individual answerability that creates a dynamic relationship between one's material conditions and one's theory about literacy. Taking the answerability concept from Bakhtin, teachers are ethically answerable for the work that they ask students to do in the classroom. Bakhtin describes the process of answerability as a lifelong task, never quite finished. This may be why some teachers need to change the syllabus for a course each time that they teach it. I usually get my best ideas for the next term in the middle of the current term so that I can't wait to finish this term in order to do a better job next time. A teacher should continually examine his or her motives for asking students to write. Each person's motives will change and evolve over time. Academic articles and presentations at conferences ask us to reconsider our motives and our practices. Teachers label good articles or conference sessions as inspiring. If the motives to teach writing wane, teachers need to be re-inspired, so they can in turn ask students to seek their own motives to write. But all of these grand plans and the various teaching strategies suggested in this article can readily be reduced to more superficial school writing if the teacher does not make it a point to reveal his or her motives for assigning writing to the students. The ethical reasons for selecting a particular theme and a sequence of assignments should be stated early in the course, permitting the students to decide whether to join this community of writers or to drop the course. Once again, the motive for writing is of primary importance; only this time, it is the teacher's motive for writing the syllabi that matters.

When teachers discuss their motives for assigning writing, they are demonstrating to students that motive matters. The teacher's job is to

encourage students to examine their motives for writing--to ask them to do more than write to please the teacher so they can pass the course. People like Maxine Hairston worry that when we acknowledge politics, we are asking students to assume our motives for writing. Yet, traditional composition teachers ask students to assume their motives of demonstrating acceptability to the university. I believe that students have better motives to write than to sublimate themselves to the great university. I have learned that the teacher must respect students for who they are. Students have their own motives to write that come from their everyday lives. When a prison inmate, who was a student of mine, was interviewed by a local newspaper about his writing, he made a comment that was puzzling to me. He said that as a teacher I never told him what to write, I just helped him to say the things that he had always wanted to say. I couldn't immediately understand what he meant because I had indeed given him writing assignments. That quote has stuck with me for years. I think that what this student was saying was that literacy makes it possible to say what we mean, to make meaning from our lives. In other words, the teacher may assign the writing, but the student assigns the meaning to the writing.

An Example of Answerability

Students must begin to see that their life experiences are worth writing about. The fastest way that I have found to communicate this to students is to save past examples of meaningful student writing and read these aloud in class, focusing on the strengths of the writer. As the teacher, my goal is to collect writing--from students--that I can't wait to read. As a conclusion to this article, I will do the same with you; I will share a section of a piece of powerful writing done by a student.

A year ago, I used ethnographic techniques to study a student in my undergraduate composition course, who was not doing well. I learned during an interview that he was a new graduate student who was required to take my class for teaching certification but that the grade in the course did not matter to him as long as he passed. This student explained that he did not invest a lot of effort into my class because he felt that I asked for an inordinate amount of work and that the grades in his graduate courses were more important. I was mortified that he did not value my class. Finally, he connected with the last assignment, memoir, and told about being contacted by the mother of a childhood friend that he used to play "Superheroes" with. Here are two paragraphs taken from the end of his essay that began with a flashback to his childhood.

I discovered my childhood friend had been found on the bank of a river after being shot in the head twice at point blank range. What

made it even worse is that the police apprehended Terrance as the prime suspect. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My stomach felt like a churning knot grinding away at my insides as I kept shaking my head in disbelief. I was utterly dumbfounded. Later that evening, Mrs. Hughes asked me to be a pall bearer at Bob's funeral. Of course I agreed and asked if there was anything else I could do. She said she wanted Bob's childhood friends to be the pall bearers and not any of the thugs he was hanging out with prior to his death. I agreed to find all of the pall bearers. I did not realize what a monumental task this was going to be. As I began looking for our old friends, I discovered that most were either in prison, dealing drugs, or dead. The ones who did not fit into one of these three categories had done the same thing I had done—got the hell out of Springfield without even looking back....

After the funeral Tony and I began discussing how Springfield had deteriorated so quickly. Tony began talking about the kids he works with as the youth minister. He said they all want to become drug dealers and think that all there is to life is making money. I told Tony I just don't understand what has happened and asked him, "What ever happened to the days when Kids just wanted to be Superheroes?"

In a later interview, the student revealed that he revised this essay more times than were required for a grade for his own personal satisfaction. The next term, he read this essay aloud to his students in his student teaching placement. This student's essay was not only well-written, but he used this experience to make a statement about where he had come from and where he was going in his life. I am humbled by this writing. This writing comes from the student's own ethical answerability; the greatest evidence of this is that the writing brings its author integrity. To ask for less is to disrespect the lives of our students. When motive matters, writing speaks for the writer's life.

Nancy Mack is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literatures at Wright State University, where she teaches composition and is the codirector of a summer institute for teachers.

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